

# King of the Sea

by airbendergal

Category: Final Fantasy XII

Genre: Drama, Fantasy

Language: English

Characters: Ashe, Basch, Larsa, Zargabaath

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2016-04-15 12:41:25

Updated: 2016-04-27 15:02:48

Packaged: 2016-04-27 17:37:32

Rating: T

Chapters: 3

Words: 9,124

Publisher: [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)

Summary: Following the events of Final Fantasy XII, KING OF THE SEA takes place ten years after the game. After a period of relative peace, a mysterious force coming from the Naldoan Sea threatens the whole of Ivalice. Hard decisions must be made, the first of which is the fortification of a magical fortress. An ode to GRIN's unfinished FFXII spin-off, FORTRESS: FINAL FANTASY.

## 1. Chapter 1: Politicking

### \*\*CHAPTER 1: POLITICKING\*\*

The assassin was quick, a pulsating blur rushing down the hall. The curtains suddenly swelled on the left wall. The portrait of Emperor Gramis on the right came crashing down in an irreverent din. Basch kept his eyes on the shadow, breathing heavily as he sprinted in his full suit of metal armor. His knees were getting too old for chases, he reckoned, as he heard a pop come from below. How audacious of that trespasser to infiltrate the palace during the day!

The blur turned a corner. Basch trailed him into the next passageway, but stopped in his tracks as he doubled the bend. The ceiling suddenly closed over him. The sunlight was ripped right out of the air, and in its wake were patches of light. Titanic beams raced down the sides of metal plates that made for walls, and the pungent smell of some burning fuel leaked into his helmet. He knew this room. The beating heart of the palace. The mechanical floor.

"Damn it," he muttered, looking around helplessly. He had lost sight of the killer in the sea of pumping engines. Fat wires raced across the floor and gave off the occasional spark, and in the distance numerous magicite cells flickered in the dark like constellations. Basch took out his *Tournesol*—the great-sword he used to strike Vayne Solidor down—and brandished it. The hilt of his weapon began to glow and illuminated the space around him. In the darkness, it would give off light. In the Emperor's most vulnerable times, it

would always be there to guard him.

\_Protect the young lord. Protect Larsa.\_

Those words filled his heart with fire. Basch put both of his closed fists to his heart, and felt his chest surge with an overpowering energy. It boiled inside of him, filled his bones and muscles with an incessant rattling feeling—as if some monster had wanted to escape from his flesh. Then he shouted: "\_Immobilize!"\_ The energy broke out in a raw starburst of green. Tongues of emerald fire shot out in all directions passing through engines and beams and all! But no, it would not break the machines. It would only need to break one person. In the distance there was a sharp scream of pain, and then a loud, echoing thud. Basch grinned under his helmet, for he had done the breaking.

Basch broke into a clumsy sprint, head still spinning from conjuring the magic. He gripped the \_Tournesol\_ and sped towards the sound. He passed rows of chugging contraptions and braved through a cloud of heavy steam. A figure on the ground was closing in: a teenager, probably in his later years! He was all dressed in black, paralyzed in a very awkward fetal position. He looked like a figurine that had fallen off a shelf. His arms and legs were as hard as stone, but his face could still move, and more importantly, talk. Perhaps he could explain why he was holding a knife, and why the tip of it was sprinkled with some red.

Basch sheathed his sword, bent down, and grabbed the assassin by his long hair. He pulled him up by his locks so that they could see eye-to-eye. "Fearless," Basch commended in a low voice. His voice muffled as he spoke through his helmet. "And reckless. If you were a good assassin, you would have come here during the night." He scraped his eyes down the assassin's outfit. It was a light, leather armor of the darkest black he'd ever seen.

"Who sent you here?" Basch continued. The look on the teen's face seemed rattled, but the man did not speak. "Young men like you shouldn't be out killing royalty. You should be in the Academy. You should be finding a woman to settle down with. We live in a time of peace, and it is my sole duty to keep it that way."

"Guh—" The assassin began. "\_Gluh!"\_

The teen's stomach was met with a hard punch.

"Are you mute, boy? Speak!" Basch ordered. He gripped the assassin's hair tighter, so hard it made the young man squeal and gurgle out blood. "You have just attempted to kill the Emperor of Archadia! Have you no bearing on the implication of your actions? These such activities are punishable by \_death!"\_

"Buh—|Buhlâ—" The teenager drawled through crimson teeth.

Basch's lips mimicked the cutthroat's muttering. "Buh—|Buhlâ—|You are not making sense!"

"Bulthâ—|." Now, his eyes were flickering, and he was growing pale.

"Stay sharp." Basch knew the look in the young man's eyes. It was the

same sort of slipping of a dying soldier. He carefully placed the killer down with a clunk and patted his body. Perhaps he had a deep wound—or perhaps he had broken one of his ribs. The man turned the teen over and looked at his back. Sticking out from his left side was some sort of metal stick, and it looked painfully planted into his skin. Perhaps the young killer had impaled himself from the blast. Basch couldn't help but feel responsible, but he had no time for pity. "Stay sharp, you fool."

Three imperial gunmen entered the floor, rifles cocked and ready. "Judge Gabranth!"

Basch looked behind him. They were standing ready for orders.

"How is the emperor?" Judge Gabranth asked worriedly. "Is he hurt?"

"Just a minor cut on the right arm, sir," answered the forward most gun-man.

That outraged Basch. "Just a minor cut, you say? They said this assassin was this—" and he showed them the exact distance using his thumb and pointer finger, "—close to cutting down Emperor Larsa. I leave him with you for seven minutes, and he is almost killed! Who was in charge?"

The soldiers dared not make eye contact with Judge Gabranth, or each other. A susurrantion passed between them.

"Who was in charge!?" Gabranth yelled with an edge sharper than steel.

"My lord!" One soldier took a step forward, and bowed lowly. "Forgive me, my lord!"

"Unforgivable, soldier." Basch grabbed the young assassin and callously threw him before the gunmen's feet. "Bring this killer to the dungeons. Tend to his wounds and chain him. We are to have him interrogated there. After, go to Judge Zargabaath and deposit your arms and armor. This is your last day as an Imperial Gunner. Consider this mercy."

"Thank you, my lord!" The responsible gunman replied with a lower bow.

The three gunmen grappled the assassin by his stone-hard limbs and spirited him away from the mechanical floor. Their metal armor clinked away into the distance, and the sound of electric sparks running across the generators returned in the wake of the commotion.

Basch sighed and shook his head. "To another day," he said, raising an imaginary cup.

It was eleven o'clock in the morning.

\* \* \*

><p>Basch fon Ronsenburg was a decorated war veteran. He served in the Dalmaskan army for almost seven years, after his homeland of

Landis was invaded and occupied by the Archadian Empire. Basch fon Ronsenburg rose to the rank of captain only after three yearsâ€”something quite unheard of in such military frameworks. His twin brother, Noah fon Ronsenburg stayed in their homeland of Landis, and with the help of his exceptional fighting skills, rose to the rank of Archadian Judge. After fifteen years of service, he had earned his place in Archadia's elite circle of judgesâ€”the supreme commanders of the Archadian military and the guardians of the noble House Solidorâ€”and was addressed by the name Judge Gabranth.<p>

During the 704 Valendian calendar, the empire of Archadia invaded Dalmasca. Basch fon Ronsenburg defended his new homeland on the frontlines in Nalbina Fortress. It was a small but hardy point of entry which but kept the Archadian armada from advancing into Dalmascan territory. Nalbina fell like a house of cards, and Archadia continued its advance towards the Dalmascan capital of Rabanastre. Noah fon Ronsenburg assassinated King Raminas of Dalmasca in the Rabanastran royal palace, and framed Basch for the killing. Being his identical twin, Noah got away with the killing. Basch was then arrested and brought underground for two years. The sky pirates Balthier, Fran and Vaan then liberated him in the Nalbina Underground.

Basch served a year in the rebellion against the Empire, working with Princess Ashe and the sky pirates. Their connections and interactions with Lord Larsa Solidor of Archadia and Lord Al-Cid Margrace of Rozarria helped settle issues within the feud. Unfortunately, it was not enough to stop the bloodlust of Lord Vayne Solidorâ€”heir to the Archadian throne, who murdered his father and became Emperor of Archadia for a mere three months. Vayne was swayed by power. He attempted to reach the level of godhood and created \_The Bahamut\_, a weapon of mass destruction. During the final battle with Vayne, Judge Gabranth died protecting his honor and Lord Larsa. During his final moments, Noah requested his twin brother to continue protecting the young lord and the good of the Empire.

Basch took possession of Noah's armor and title. No one but Emperor Larsa, Queen Ashe, and the sky pirates Balthier, Fran, Penelo and Vaan, knew about the switch. Basch continued to serve as Judge Gabranth for many years. Ten years have passed since the great battle.

\* \* \*

><p>Judge Gabranth entered the emperor's study cautiously. He was anxious, but more than that, ashamed. He could not show his face to Larsa, not after the breach in security. Gabranth could already imagine how frightened the emperor must have felt, and how powerless the ruler must have been without a judge by his side. An assassin in the throne room! What madness! His honor had been crushed! He would ask for pardon, and if necessary, answer to the dire consequences.<p>

To his surprise, His Excellency was on his desk, signing some documentsâ€”occasionally leaning back to the scribe and asking clarifications as to what he had scrawled on the parchment. It was as if nothing had happened, as if almost getting killed was the most natural thing in the world!

Judge Gabranth felt his ears hot with guilt. "My lord."

The emperor stopped writing. Larsa looked up from his papers, and looked at the judge inquisitively. "What's the matter, Gabranth? You look as if you've seen a ghost."

His nonchalant reaction seemed to worsen the matter. Was Lord Larsa being sarcastic?

Gabranth bowed lowly. He could not bear to look Larsa straight in the eye. "Emperor, I take full responsibility for what happened this morning" And he stopped, expecting a good shouting or some other emperor-like condemnation. But Larsa did not speak. It seemed no one did today. "I shan't leave you with those gunmen alone again. They are ill-experienced. Forgive me, sire."

"Sir, if you would give us a minute," Larsa said, addressing the scribe.

"Very good, my lord," the scribe replied, sliding out of the study.

"Emperor Larsa, forgive me, I" " "

"That's enough sorrow for now, Basch."

Basch looked up, and removed his helmet. Now he could see Larsa in full clarity. The emperor was seated in a most regal way"as if posing for a portrait"square shoulders exuding authority and deep blue eyes beaming attentiveness. In this instance, however, his visage gave way to something quite tender. "Lord Larsa" "I" " "

"It is dangerous to talk about assassinations in front of other court members."

"My lord, this one harmed you," Basch worried, looking to the ripped sleeve of the emperor.

Larsa looked down to his cut. He covered it with his left hand. It did sting, but no one was to know. "A flesh wound. Nothing more. And you're not to speak of it to anyone in the palace."

Basch hung his head. How could he keep such a big deal a secret?

"This is not only for me. Imagine how unsafe the other staff would feel if they realize there was an incident. They'd be performing their duties in fear. We don't need that right now. I am not ignorant, Basch. I am fully aware of the threats on my life. Four assassins have attempted to kill me in the last ten years, two of which took place in this very palace. If there is anyone to be concerned the most, it should be me. Yet I sit here, signing papers. You worry."

"I always worry, my lord. You are the emperor."

"And you are my friend. I am telling you, as a friend, that you should not fear leaving my side. I'm fully capable of protecting myself. I know how to use a sword," the emperor suddenly chuckled, then immediately collected himself. A trait he had picked up in the

last few years. "Basch, there are more important things to be dealt with. For example, these signatories. And those old bastards later in the afternoon who pry into these signatories."

"The senate, your excellency," Basch corrected, a bit annoyed.

He knew Larsa and the senate hated each other some days, and tolerated each other on most. Certain policies would take months to draft, because of conflicting interests. Basch hated politics, but was impressed on how well Emperor Larsa could navigate such dicey waters. The man had seen how the once child-emperor had matured into a man worthy of carrying the Solidor name. He had seen how the young lord had learned the Game fast. He realized how the senate hated Larsa for being a quick learner, yet everyone still kept all sorts of polite formalities when dealing with each other. Archadians were so non-confrontational and passive-aggressive about many matters. If they were Landisians, the problems would have been quickly resolved by duel!

"Would you dine with me Basch? 'Tis almost luncheon," Larsa said, tucking the papers into a drawer.

Emperor Larsa rose from his seat, gathering the train of his robe under his heavy, wooden chair. He strode towards Basch and beamed him an ambivalent smile. The two of them would have stood at the same height, were it not for the tall diadem that weighed down on the emperor's head. Basch put back on his helmet, and then held out his arm for his master to hold. The man gracefully declined. Instead, Larsa gently pushed the judge's metal arm down, strode forward towards the door and opened it for the both of them.

\* \* \*

><p>"I would like to turn your attention to the third section of this bill, my lords."<p>

There was the flipping sound of pages, a hundred of them all beating like a flock of birds. Emperor Larsa squinted, looking at the fine print on the document. The ink on his paper had been smeared, but he was too tired to complain. He placed the documents down and listened attentively to the senator, who would be reading the section out loud.

"Section Three of Imperial Bill Five-Oh-Four-Five!" declared Chancellor Drace. "Eligibility of half-castes in regards to applying for a gentry status. The individual would be allowed to apply for a gentry's status, and would be granted the following rights resulting in that status. First, the individual would be allowed to hold estate in the districts of Nilbasse, Trant, Molberry and Rienna. Second, the individual would be allowed to defend himself in court without going through the previous processes as prescribed by Imperial Law Oh-Seven-Oh-Nine. Third, in regards with marriage to another full-gentry, the properties would be allowed to transfer to the half-gentry in case of the pure full-gentry's deathâ€"

"I will have to stop you right there, Senator Drace," cut in another senator. All heads turned to a man with a long, braided beard. His name was Senator Granch, and he was stroking his chin wildly. "Since when did that third bullet get pass the fifth reading? I recalled a number of senators voting against such matter."

"Your numbers are mistaken. The senate was in favor of this, six-to-five."

"Which means someone must have switched his vote."

"I am the one, Senator Granch."

"Chancellor Drace, I suspect you have a good rationale for making such a decision! This is madness! We cannot agree to such matters. If you are to open this window of opportunity to the half-castes, then there would be more bad consequences than good!"

"Such as?"

"The rise of murder charges, your honors."

Emperor Larsa spoke up. "Senator Granch, since when has murder been connected to granting half-castes rights on properties?"

Granch beamed irritated eyes at the emperor. He gritted his teeth. "My lord, a good friend of mine was killed in his flat last month. He was married to a half-caste, but they did not have children. Him and his wife were the only two people in the flat during that evening. When he died, his properties could not be transferred to the wife, and his assets were frozen by the central bank. Curiously enough, his wife is one of the prime petitioners of this bill. Look!"

Emperor Larsa grimaced. He picked up his copy of the bill and furiously flipped to the last page, to where all the signatures were. "Signed by a certain Charlotte Vint," he muttered and looked back up at Senator Granch. The old man was nodding. "Are you saying that Mrs. Charlotte Vint was responsible for her husband's death, and that she's pushing for this bill to retrieve all her husband's frozen assets?"

"You pulled the words right out of my mouth, Your Excellency!" Granch exclaimed, seemingly triumphant.

"That is a blatant accusation. There is no such proof," Larsa retorted, folding his arms. "Perhaps you are forgetting that these half-castes have been pushing for a gentry status for decades now. If this government is to function for the common good, then will this bill not be the best for all? After all, the only caveat is that one of their parents does not belong to Archadian aristocracy. There still have, to some degree, noble blood. Can they not be excused for how they were born?"

"When you give people excuses, they are bound to abuse it," Granch spat.

"Gentlemen, enough, please," Chancellor Drace said calmly. But Senator Granch looked so furious, he could have set anything on fire by just looking at it. "Granch, say your peace."

"Yes, I would like to say that if this bill is passed, we would be letting cockroaches into our city. They would be breeding even more half-castes! This bill would be challenging the system we have taken so long to uphold," Granch explained, eyes scanning the senate. He saw their conflicted looks. He then faced Emperor Larsa, and a

capricious glint flickered in the senator's his eye. "Of course, we cannot blame His Excellency for supporting such peasant sentiments. He has had much experience with mingling with outsider trash in the past."

Larsa's eyes shot open and he almost flew off from his seat. \_"Excuse me?"\_

"With all due respect, Excellency, you must not let your sentiments cloud your judgment on this matter. The senate knows of your dealings with the sky pirates and the Dalmaskan insurgents many years ago. We have been kind to turn a blind eye to these for the past decade, but we will not allow you to bring such ideologies into our society."

Larsa felt defeated for a second. The way Granch said it but only reaffirmed his beliefs: Archadia knew everything about his past, and if he were to do anything to radically change the society, his questionableâ€"not to mention personal!â€"past would be exposed. He would dare not walk that path. The emperor could have called Granch out with a certain '\_ad hominem\_', but he knew the senator's ears would not hear any opinion but their own. "Senator, the half-castes have already reached the boiling point. It will not be long before we get burnt. They have already caused a ruckus in Old Archades. Additionally, many gentry are in favor of the bill. This issue has taken four months to reach the fifth reading. One cannot callously toss it away. If the senate wishes, we will look through it for another meeting."

"You all but delay this futile cause. I am going to file an official inquiry on the Vint case tomorrow, and will present to you the findings in a few weeks, your honors."

Larsa massaged his temples. "This bickering will get us nowhere. I call for a recess."

The doors were opened. The senators rose from their seats and exited the chamber with much muttering and hissing. Everyone except for Chancellor Drace and Emperor Larsa were left inside the room.

"Progress, my lord," Drace smiled wearily. He cupped Larsa's square shoulder.

"Yes, it would have gone much faster without Granch's incessant buzzing," Larsa sneered, taking a kerchief out of his pocket and dabbing his forehead. The skin under his diadem was exceptionally sweaty. The man's tone softened. "Thank you for switching your vote, Drace. I'm sure your sister would be proud."

"My sister devoted her entire life to your cause, Excellency. I would do the same."

"Thank you," was the only thing Larsa said, but wished he could say much more.

"After the recess, there is one more thing we have to discuss before the session adjourns."

"What is it?"



"The issue you've been avoiding for too long."

Emperor Larsa gulped. He feared this day would come.

## 2. Chapter 2: Whispers of Ice

### \*\*CHAPTER 2: WHISPERS OF ICE\*\*

The senate chambers suddenly turned cold once the senators started streaming in. After a thirty minute recess, all men appeared well rested, including Senator Granch, who was chatting and chuckling with a fellow senator named Lebleau.

Emperor Larsa drummed his fingers impatiently on his seat's armrest. His eyes were focused on Senator Lebleau—currently the most dangerous man in the room. "The senator of action", as everyone liked to call him. Lebleau was a pragmatic individual, who never rested until his plans were materialized. Larsa agreed to most of the senator's diplomacies, for they seemed all in good faith and were all very reasonable, however there was one proposition the emperor would never agree to—the one they were about to discuss.

"Your Excellency, it is time we bring up the most pressing matter of the day," Lebleau said, taking out a thin document from one of his files. "Please take out the yellow document, your honors."

Larsa hesitantly pinched out his copy from its envelope as though it had just come out of the hearth. He scanned the title and a cold knot formed in his stomach. The man flipped to the second page and saw pictures of different women, all of which his eyes tried to avoid. He forced himself to see them only as blurs.

"My lord, it is time we talked about the future of the Solidor line. We have avoided this topic for too long. You were due for marriage two years ago, when you turned twenty," Lebleau reminded the senate. "For reasons we cannot comprehend, you have managed to violate the agreement for twenty-one months. The women have been waiting for a reply for more than a year now."

"Senators, we have more important matters to attend to—" Larsa's voice went faint as questioning glares turned to him and threatened to swallow him alive. The emperor knew he had used the same excuse a million times over, and that those words could not save him this time around.

"Sire, this is the most important personal matter you would have to attend to. You are the last remaining member of House Solidor. I do not mean to be morbid, but if you are to die without an heir, Archadia would fall into civil war. Already, there have been attempts on your life, the fourth of happened eleven o'clock this morning."

Emperor Larsa looked away. He understood the circumstances that revolved around his current state of life, but was not ready for any sort of commitment. He wished that if he were to love a woman, then he would love her with the utmost purity and sincerity. He wanted to be with a woman whom he could be himself around—to be in a position where he did not have to put on masks. "Who are the candidate

senators?" he asked.

"On the top leftâ€"that is the Duchess of Moorabella. Thirty-two years old. She has great love for cockatrice, and has knowledge on spices. Having connections with their family would increase our leverage in Jylland, your grace. Their family monopolizes the spice trade in West Ordalia and they have many connectiâ€"

"â€"Too old," Larsa cut in with a suppressed laugh. He lowered the document and grinned sarcastically at Lebleau. "She might be past the age of child-bearing."

A few senators guffawed in their seats in agreement.

Lebleau nodded. "Well, if you are looking for a younger woman, you should consider the next candidate. Princess Serani of Rozarria. She is Lord Al-Cid Margrace's youngest sister. Nineteen years of age. She is the eighteenth daughter of Emperor Al-Zedir. In my humble opinion, she is the best bet. This marriage would quell all doubts about Archadia and Rozarria. This arrangement will also grant us opportunities to tap into the most powerful mining industry in the world."

The emperor looked into the portrait, quite intrigued. Al-Cid had mentioned his younger sister a few times in the past, but Larsa never knew how she looked like. To his surprise, they looked vastly different. The only facial feature she shared with her brother was her strong, hook nose. She looked as if she had never seen the outside world, and her eyes gave way to some sort of melancholy. "Hmâ€|" he drawled, looking at the princess' picture. "Who else is on the list?"

"The last is Queen Ashelia of Dalmasca, your grace."

Larsa hung his head. "Queen Ashe? Is this some sort of jest?" It was the craziest thing he had heardâ€"ever! "Would she even agree to this sort of arrangement? It would be like putting Dalmasca back in the hands of the Empire. 'Tis like we are ripping open a wound long healed!"

"It was an option to consider," Lebleau explained, then bit his lip. "Your grace, Queen Ashelia has never remarried after her late husband's passing. It has been twelve years. We have gotten word she is already considering her options for a new partner. Her nation is becoming one of the major economic players in modern petrol politics. If we were to have a handle in those sort of affairs, Archadia and Dalmasca combined would dominate the petrol trade."

"There would be a backlash, senator. The Dalmascan people would rise up in protest. And where would the Queen stay? It would be ill-advised to force her to leave her land. She deservesâ€|" The emperor's voice trailed away but again. For a moment, he could imagine him and Ashe together. She was a dear friend and a trusted ally, but the idea of leashing a country long freed from Archadia's rule was insanity. "â€|She deserves much better than this. We do not need petrol. Archadia can thrive off its own resources, and our military is still quite robustâ€"fully capable of defending those resources."

"Your Excellency, our military has shrank by twenty percent in the

last decade," Granch spoke. "During the time of Emperor Gramis, our military might was at par with Rozarria. Our weapons technology industry has fallen apart ever since the closure of the Draklor Laboratories. Each year, we reduce a percentage of military expenditure on the annual budget. Now, we are but a shadow of our once great force."

"Military force at that time was necessary," Larsa reminded them, pointing to the ceiling. "Now is a time of peace, and I intend to keep it that way."

"A ruler must always be ready for war," Chancellor Drace advised gently.

"What if there is to be another war, sire?" asked Granch. "What would happen if one day we wake up and realize that the Rozarrian Empire—for example—laid siege to the entire Tchita Uplands? What if Balfonheim was suddenly breached by sky pirate threats? What are we to do?"

Granch's unthinkable scenarios played in Larsa's head. He was then brought back to the atrocity of the Archadian-Rozarrian war. Images of the carnage came in quick, consecutive flashes: the Bahamut flying over Rabanastre's paling, a Dalmaskan destroyer ship exploding into a cloud of nethicite energy, the faces of the dead soldiers, and finally the disfigured, burnt body of his brother. Emperor Larsa promised himself that he would be the last to see another soldier die. "Enough," Larsa ordered, and with a weak voice, he repeated. "Enough. I have heard and understood what needs to be done. An alliance will further our cause of peace."

"Good. Now, do you have any preference, sire?" asked Lebleau as he stared down into his paper. All senators did the same, and began pointing at the pictures and convening with each other, as if they were picking their own choice of wife.

Larsa's eyes hovered over Ashe. Her features were more mature and sharper than he remembered. Still, she had that determined look in her eyes—a battle-hardened gaze cradled with purity of intention. She was beautiful inside and out, but he could never be for her. Perhaps under different circumstances. Perhaps in another life, he thought. He could not afford the ire of Dalmasca and her people once again. "Send a message to Emperor Al-Zedir. Tell him I would be interested in seeing his daughter," Larsa said with some degree of uncertainty.

"A fine choice," Lebleau commended. "A practical one, as well."

'Practical', Larsa thought. The word seemed so utilitarian!

He didn't even know where to start. Did that picture accurately represent Princess Serani's personality? Would she be docile or controlling? Did she speak the common tongue? How would she react to Archadian politics? He could not imagine himself living with a complete stranger!

"My lord?" a voice came out of nowhere.

Larsa snapped out of his daze. "Apologies," he said, snapping out of

his daze. "Errâ€|when will I be able to see Princess Serani?"

"The message would take some time to reach Ambervale. The earliest we could bring her here is in two weeks time," Lebleau smiled. "My lord, there is no turning back from this. If we are to send Emperor Al-Zedir your letter, he would assume you are willing to wed his daughter."

Larsa cringed. "Iâ€|Iâ€|" He brought the document up to his face, hoping to hide the fact that he was blushing profusely. He took some time to look at the picture of the Rozarrian princess. He came to convince himself that Serani had her own sort of innocent beauty. Perhaps she would not be the disaster he feared. But was this woman to be the next empress of Archadia? Would she be the one to bear his children? The thought of it all made his stomach turn!

"Alright," the emperor agreed. He felt as if he had sold his soul to the devilâ€"in this case, Senator Lebleau. "Send the message to Rozarria within three days."

"Very good, my lord," replied Lebleau, bowing lightly. He looked around and saw that the senators around him were smiling and nodding. "It seems we are finished for today, and for the week."

There was a sinking feeling within Larsa's chest. "Yes," he noted sadly.

"The session is now adjourned," Chancellor Drace declared with a light smash of the gavel. "A pleasant week-end to you, my lords."

\* \* \*

><p>Judge Gabranth descended the stairwell. Deeper into the dungeons he went, traversing through rows of sinister smelling cells. The sounds of mice-speak and dripping water resonated throughout the prison. He was pleasantly surprised to note that no one had occupied the execution chamber for months (Emperor Larsa was against capital punishment), and that no blood-curdling screams had bubbled in the torture chamber. The judge reached a pitâ€"a seemingly endless oneâ€"where four chains reached down into the abyss. There was a guard stationed by a lever. Gabranth approached the man and commanded him, "Reel number four."<p>

At once the lever was pulled downwards, and the screeching of some mechanical contraption broke into song. Chain number four shortened and hoisted up what looked like an oversized birdcage. Chained inside of it was a figure, which Gabranth supposed was the assassin. "Leave us, sir," he instructed the guard.

The guard nodded and left the pit area. Now Gabranth was alone with the killer, and the judge was ready to drown the assassin in questions. "Who sent you here?"

To the judge's surprise, the shadow broke into a mad laugh and began wriggling in its shackles. Its voice was loud and strong, and more familiar than he had expected. "You'd better get your eyes checked, old man," said what seemed to be killer, dropping effortlessly out of its chains. "You wouldn't be able to tell Queen Ashe apart from a cactoid."

"\_Balthier\_?" The judge removed his helmet and peered closer. It was he, gods be damned! "You sky pirate! Where is the assassin? Is he working with you?"

"Calm, captain," Balthier grinned, capering towards the edge of the cage. He clasped the bars with his hands and peeked his face through the space between them. "The boy is with meâ€"sort of."

"\_Sort of\_?" repeated Basch with a passionate fury. "So you plotted to attack the emperor? I could have you executed on the spot!"

"Your master is not one for executions, if I remember correctly," the sky pirate rebutted promptly. "And it was only to get your attention. Of course, his highness should not be seen conniving with a sky pirate, oh no! Filth like me would have to work behind the scenesâ€"in dark, slimy, and smelly shitholes like this, for example. Mind you, this place doesn't smell like roses."

"Lord Larsa did not have to shed blood," Basch stated firmly. "Now give me a good reason not to have you tortured."

"Ice."

"Ice? What in Faram's name are you blabbering about?"

"I'm building up the story, captain. You see, I've been on a quest to find a certain magical item. They call it the 'Cache of Glabados'. Does that name ring a bell?" But seeing as Basch was unresponsive, Balthier continued. "Anyway, this cache is worth more than all the gold in the world combined. According to legend, it's got the power to bring its user forward or backward in time."

"Time magickâ€"I've seen that before. We use it to slow down enemies and make haste our attacks. Penelo used to do it all the time."

"Oh no, captain. This is unheard of. I'm talking up 'til a thousand years into the past or into the future. The ability to change the world we live in today. Perhaps we could prevent Ivalice from war's horrors. Perhaps there would be a way to change the fate of your homeland of Landis."

Basch paused for a moment. "Landisâ€"?" And he thought of his mother, and Noah. "No, toying with the time stream is like begging for death. A single misdeed in the timeline could cause a devastating domino effect."

"True!" Balthier agreed casually with a hunch of his shoulders. "The cache is none of the empire's concern. However, I came here to warn you of something that is. Remember that piece of the Kerwon continent under Archadia's banner? Yes, that piece of land that used to be Landis. Well, there is something quite \_fishy\_ going on the coastline."

"How is this related to your cache?"

"The cache was rumored to be found in that very fortress. Fran and I did some tomb raiding. Aside from running into numerous booby-traps, something really caught our eye, you see," Balthier explained, swinging the cage closer to Basch. Now the pirate was moving back and forth like a pendulum, the sound of his voice snatching away from

time to time. "Ice, captain! A sliver of ice stretching across the coastline" sixteen kilometers long."

"It's almost winter, such weather disturbance is expected," Basch attempted to rationalized, but at the back of his mind something was wrong. He had never heard of such a phenomenon happening in Landis."

"The Naldoan Sea turning into a frozen wasteland? Good captain, this has nothing to do with weather patterns. There is something mysterious brewing within the depths of those waters. There's magic involved, most certainly. Perhaps a disturbance of the jagds."

"Magicite? Nethicite? No. No such power could cause a widespread permafrost."

"If you don't believe me, I understand. A judge magister would never be wise to trust a sky pirate like me. It's not like I've saved your ass a couple of times in the past, hmm?" Balthier smirked cheekily. "If you want proof of the hoarfrost, I suggest you go there yourself. However, you can't take any airships with you, I'm afraid. No gloss-air rings work well in the jagds."

Too much doubt clouded Basch's mind. Real or not, a threat like this could jeopardize Archadian sovereignty, and become a menace to the entire continent of Kerwon. "Balthier, if what you are saying is true, Emperor Larsa must hear about it. I will talk to him about it in the morrow."

"That's a good man. A faithful dog to his master," Balthier grinned. "Now, if you don't mind, Basch, I'd want to get out of this shithole. Have any extra keys on you, hmm?"

Basch growled. He hated how much Balthier still struck a chord with him. "Don't speak to anyone of this," the judge dictated, patting his pockets. He managed to take out a key. "If anyone is to ask, the story is: I sent you crashing to your impendent doom. You're a dead man again, Balthier, and don't you forget it."

The judge floundered to the lever, pressed some buttons on the panel board where it was mounted, and finally inserted the key in a hole just below the treadle. Balthier's cage clicked open, and he kicked the door open. The sky pirate leaped out and landed squarely on the space next to Basch.

"You haven't changed." Balthier fixed his cuffs and patted the dirt off his hands. His lips curved into a smile, as if he had suddenly remembered a sweet memory. "Tell me, Basch: do you still think of her?"

The question took Basch by surprise. The words came before he even had time to think about it. "Always. Never for a moment have I stopped thinking about her."

"There is a possibility you may see her more often," Balthier told his friend. The sky pirate began his ascent up a flight of steps.

"How?" Basch involuntarily stepped forward as the buccaneer took

another step back. "Wait, Balthier. Don't leave."

Balthier chuckled at the thought of Basch's helplessness. His look was that of a sad puppy. "There are rumors that she is open to the possibility of marriage to a \_certain\_ Archadian emperor."

"\_What\_?" Basch asked, in a voice louder than he expected.

"Of course, that is only if Larsa chooses Queen Ashe. I'm sure there are hundreds of women all fighting to win his affection," Balthier said, now returning to Basch. The pirate cupped the judge's shoulder and leaned into his ear. "Tell me, captain: how far are you willing to go to protect them?"

"I would die for them," Basch stated, his gaze fearless and unwavering.

The two had a glaring match for quite some time until the sound of metal footsteps broke their gazes. Balthier quickly gamboled to the edge of the dais, where his cage still swung. He climbed over the railings and hung over the abyssal pit. "Well, that's my cue. If you ever need me to save your ass again, just scream my name. I'll be there quicker than you could sayâ€"\_yoopsâ€\_"\_!"

There was a sudden, banshee-like screech. Basch's eyes dropped all too suddenly. It didn't take him long to realize Balthier had disappeared down the black tunnel. The chain unfurled wildly. There was a loud snapping noise, and the clamor ended with an echoing clatter.

Basch quickly regained his metal facade as a group of Imperial swordsmen came marching in. "Judge Gabranth?" asked the tallest man in the group. "The killer?"

The answer was swift: "I sent him crashing to his impendent doom."

### 3. Chapter 3: Vagrants from the Valley

#### \*\*CHAPTER 3: VAGRANTS FROM THE VALLEY\*\*

"Blessed, we pray for the soul of your dutiful servant, that in his earthly life he hath served you well..."

The bishop let down a long censer and swung it. The vessel dipped forward and shifted back, releasing thick billows of incense into the air. The cacophonous sound of the priests chanting all at once, and the ghostly pealing of the bells did all but make her happy. Exactly eleven years ago, her husband died and her country was invaded. Today she was dressed in all blackâ€"the same dress she had worn to his funeral. It choked her in some parts of her body, but she insisted to wear it.

"Queen Ashelia," began the bishop, rising from his prostate position. "Any words?"

Ashe looked blankly at him for a moment. There were no words, only tears in her eyes. "My lord husbandâ€"was aâ€"|aâ€"|" she stuttered, scrambling to find some adjective that could have encompassed his

whole person. "He's a selfless man. He is."

The bishop bowed lightly, feeling the queen could continue no further. "Brothers in Faram, we must live a life of love. It has been ten years since the liberation of Dalmasca, and yet we still feel the scars of the Archadian-Rozarrian war. I am not asking you to forget, but to forgive. We must look towards a better tomorrow—towards a future where we may walk in peace with those who have hurt us."

The priests behind Ashe nodded at each other in agreement.

"Queen Ashelia, you may now bless the cenotaph," instructed the bishop.

Ashe moved forward and up to the cenotaph. Before her rose a large, black marble tombstone, surrounded by a moat of galbana lilies so thick it made the queen look as if she was walking on fire. She picked her footing through the flowers and touched the black slab. She felt over the gilded carvings that spelled out his name: Rasler Helios Nabradia. She glided her fingers over each letter, feeling it as if it was his skin.

"May the blessing of god guide your return to the Maker's bosom. Faram." Ashe muttered under suppressed quivers. A tingling sensation rose up her nose. She was ready to cry.

The bishop dipped a palm leaf into a bucket of holy water and sprinkled it across the tombstone. The man passed the leaf to Ashe, and she also wetted the slab. The drops of water ran down Rasler's cenotaph like raindrops on a glass.

It was a stormy night—the night he died, she remembered.

\* \* \*

><p>The ten years after the Archadian-Rozarrian war were kind to her, at the least. Queen Ashelia had no problem liberating her country from Archadia's rule after the death of Vayne Solidor. Emperor Larsa was quick to give Dalmasca freedom, despite many voices against the matter. The Archadian military had withdrawn all its forces in six months—all its bases across the Estersand, Westersand, and Giza Plains were demolished.<p>

The first three years, however, had some economic repercussions. Without Archadian support, Dalmasca plummeted into an economic depression. The country then turned to the aid of Bhujerba, which granted Dalmasca a hefty loan—that they used to develop the petrol industry that Rozarria had abandoned in the Urutan-Yensa. On the fourth year after liberation, Dalmasca began its ascent as one of the major players in petrol politics, lagging only behind the Rozarrian Empire. There were trade agreements between Rozarria and Dalmasca. Lord Al-Cid Margrace's hand in the petrol trade increased Dalmasca's leverage in the economic sphere. Meanwhile, Archadia's economic passivity caused its trading to plateau. However, Dalmasca still continued to trade livestock and metal with Archadia.

Queen Ashelia had no hopes of remarrying after Rasler's passing. She still felt very attached to him. Many times she would see her late husband's ghost wandering the halls of the palace. Many times, too, she claimed to have seen the ghost of Vayne Solidor traversing the



same halls. The queen never told anyone about the supernatural occurrences, fearing they would call her mad. She busied herself with building Dalmasca's economy and international ties. Once in a while she would entertain numerous wedding propositionsâ€”coming from different princes around the world, including Lord Margrace himself. Ashe laughed at the thought of her wedding Al-Cid, for she could not keep up to his fast-paced and daring lifestyle. She was surprised to hear that Emperor Larsaâ€”back at that time, 20â€”was now looking for a wife. She had always remembered him as a young boy, at most a teenager. They had not seen each other for six years, but had always kept in close correspondence. She, too, laughed at the thought of wedding Emperor Larsa, for he was too young, and too pure for the world.

She would continue to serve Dalmasca in the best way she could. She would wait until the time was right for her to remarry. Though, there was some voice at the back of her head wishing it would come sooner.

\* \* \*

><p>"Queen Ashelia, my apologies for disturbing you. There's been trouble in the South Gate."<p>

"The South Gate?" Ashe asked, looking up from her steaming cup of tea. She drummed her fingers anxiously on the porcelain. Deciding it was something worth looking into, she stood up and followed the soldier out of her study. "What is the problem?"

"My men have given me word that a group of refugees have come from the South," explained the soldier. He was marching at a quick pace, and Ashe found it quite hard to catch up with him in her heels. "We have no idea where they came from, but they are causing a ruckus."

"Calm," she told the soldier, meaning to say, \_slow down.\_ The guard glided into a stop and looked at the queen attentively. "Are they nomads from Giza?"

"It does not seem so, Queen Ashelia."

"Are they carrying any weapons?"

The soldier shook his head. "They have a few carts and three chocobos, according to reports. Shall we deny them entry, your grace?"

"I would want to see them first," Ashe stated, staring out the window. From her place, she could see the inner face of the South Gateâ€”and the ruins of \_Bahamut\_ looming the distance.

Queen Ashelia traveled by carriage to the South Gate. A few guards escorted her up to the parapets of the South Gate, where she could see beyond the wall. Below her, she could spot a conglomeration of people getting rowdy with the guards. Forty heads moved around like an army of ants. They shouted and slurred in a familiar, foreign accent. Ashe's eyes widened. "They are Archadians."

"Your orders, highness?"

"We must first understand their reason for coming here. Let me speak to one of them. Allow that person entry into Rabanastre," she said, scanning the sea of heads below. She saw men, and women, and children, and their pets. There were three chocobos and two large carts filled to the brim with bags and sleeping rolls.

There was sudden rumble beneath the queen. The South Gate creaked open, and a solitary figure emerged from the head of the crowd. Ashe's eyes followed the figure as it crossed through the gateway, and found its way to the parapets by means of a lift. The queen's heart beat a bit faster when she realized it was a woman, no older than she was—and she was with child.

"Queen Ashelia, it is an honor. I am Talin fon Hedenburg," the pregnant woman greeted with a curtsy. The bulge of her belly attracted Ashe's eyes—and she swore the thing would burst at any moment.

The queen kept her eyes on the refugee's stomach. "Where have you come from, Talin?" Ashe asked, though it was obvious in the way she spoke that she was from Archadia.

"We're fisher-folk from Landis, your grace."

Ashe's eyes widened. She remembered her journey to Bur-Omisace many years ago. The holy mountain had brushed the border of Landis, and the trip to there was no less than merciless. "Landis? That is a week's journey from here on foot. Why have you come so far?"

"Queen Ashe, we seek refuge in your city. Landis has fallen into a state of calamity. The Landisian coast has frozen over—our ships have frozen in their moorings! We had to retreat inland. There was no other way to escape the army!"

"An army?" Under what banner?"

Fear erupted on Talin's face. "No banner, your grace! They came—they came from the sea!"

"The sea?" Such thing was unheard of! Ashe looked at Talin, and then down at the other Landisians, who were now shifting uneasily in their places. The queen looked back at the woman, and realized that she was in pain. "Oh gods, get this woman a seat!"

"Magic, it can only be magic!" her voice went high and brittle, and her face twisted with agony. Talin's hands went to her bulge and she rubbed it fiercely. "Err—hmm—however, they're trapped—within the border of Fort Fylleborg. Its high walls are impenetrable by their forces—My husband—Skeele fon Hedenburg—he has a first hand account of what happened."

"Don't speak," Ashe ordered, realizing Talin was finding it hard to breathe. The queen instructed one of the guards. "Find her husband, Skeele. Bring him up here as well."

Skeele fon Hedenburg was a middle-aged man with a gruff beard. Were he a bit younger, he could have been mistaken for Basch. The way he dictated his words sounded so similar to the judge's. It unknowingly made Ashe blush as he spoke. "An army of a hundred or more soldiers marching out from the water! The land froze under their steps as they

marched on the shore" Skeelee began. "They were led by a large"very large man. His skin was the color of the deep blue. His head was elongated, and corals stuck out from the top of his head like a crown."

The story sounded as if he had pulled it out of a fable. "That's impossible. I have seen many strange things in my life, ser," Ashe told him. "But an army marching out from a frozen sea is not one of them."

"They covered the cliffs in a shroud of cold mist! The coastlands turned pale and froze!" Skeelee said with massive gesticulations. His hands were sweeping wildly upward. "They could not ascend the high rock faces. Their only point of entry into the Landisian city is by means of Fort Fylleborg. There is something in that fortress stopping them from making their advance."

Ashe's mind returned to her resistance days. She remembered the phenomenon on large, magic palings blocking passageways in the Golmore Jungle, in the Great Crystal of Giruvegan. She came to a conclusion that magic was truly involved. "Kerwon has always been a volatile region," Ashe noted. "The jagds are unkind to most forms of life."

"If they break past that barrier, then" Talin began. There were tears in her eyes, which came out of fear and not the pain of her motherhood.

Skeelee hushed his wife. "Don't speak, Talin. You are too weak. We have been walking for days end on, and our child only grows bigger." And he looked at Ashe. "Please, Queen Ashelia. We mean you no harm. We are but vagrants from the valley, looking for refuge"

Their faces did not lie. "I will" Ashe started, and saw their faces light up with hope. "I will do the best that I can, Skeelee. You may stay for a while in Rabanastre. The South Plaza is open to your people. I'll have a message sent to Emperor Larsa immediately, and he shall see your safe passage back to Landis."

"Emperor Larsa does not care about us," Skeelee spat.

"Skeelee!" Talin spoke up. "You speak out of your ken."

"We tried to talk to the governor of Landis about this, your majesty. He told us that help would come from the capital, but it never did!" Skeelee was furious. The stitches on his sleeves almost gave way to his fuming shoulders. "We risked our lives crossing the Paramina Rift and Bancour. My wife is about to give birth, while he sits on his throne and acts as though this situation is of no consequence! What are we to do with him?"

"Trust him," Ashe replied curtly. A sting jolted down her heart. "Emperor Larsa might have not received word of it yet. You know no airships fly in Kerwon. The message must have been delayed. Larsa is a kind man. When he knows of your state, he will not hesitate to help. He has great heart for provincials."

That quieted Skeelee. "Thank you, your grace," was all Skeelee said, but it was clear he was suppressing Anti-Solidor acid in his throat. "Please, be the one to help us."

"Once again, I will do the best I can. You have my word," Ashe promised them.

That afternoon, Queen Ashelia sent a letter to Archadia regarding the Landisian refugees. The letter included a request to transport the vagrants to Balfonheim, to where they would be under the care of Governor Foris Zecht (also known as Reddas). Emperor Larsa received the query two days later. It was the third time he got word of the frozen army. It was also the third time he dismissed it.

End  
file.